

Wright State University

CORE Scholar

University Libraries' Staff Publications

University Libraries

6-1-2008

A View from the Top

Sue Polanka

Wright State University - Main Campus, sue.polanka@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ul_pub

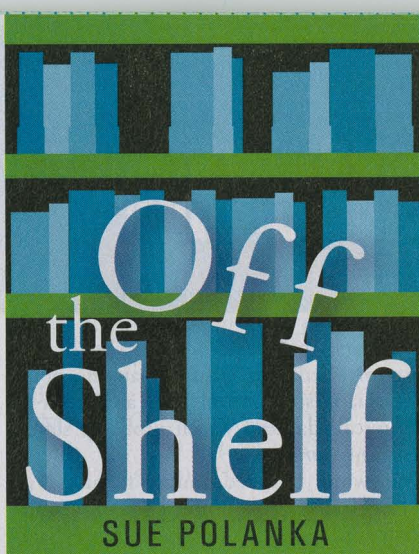


Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Polanka, S. (2008). A View from the Top. *Booklist*, 104 (19-20), 130.
https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ul_pub/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries' Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.



A View from the Top

What is the forecast for reference publishing? Publishing executives have been engaged in this ongoing discussion, most recently at the *Reference Books Bulletin* Editorial Board program, "The Future of Electronic Refer-

ence Publishing: A View from the Top," at the ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim. As a preview to the program, I asked four executives—John Barnes, executive vice president, Strategic Marketing and Business Development, Gale/Cengage Learning; Casper Grathwohl, vice president and publisher, Oxford University Press; Rolf Janke, vice president and publisher, Sage Reference; and Michael N. Ross, senior vice president, education general manager, Encyclopaedia Britannica—to answer a few questions about the industry.

SP: *What are the opportunities and challenges facing your company in the electronic reference publishing arena?*

BARNES: Our greatest challenge is reaching users to raise their awareness of the credible, accurate reference resources available in their library. We feel it is imperative that we help libraries accelerate the movement of their reference collection to electronic platforms so that we can better engage today's user.

GRATHWOHL: Electronic reference publishing over the last 5 to 10 years has often seemed like a chaotic, sloppy, and (from a publisher's perspective) anxiety-inducing business. We keep asking ourselves, "When will things calm down and stabilize?" I believe our biggest challenge is to recognize that this isn't likely to happen, period. Broad, stable paradigms are simply not going to emerge in the new info-tech culture we've developed. It's an exhausting thought, but once we embrace this, I think a new kind of order might appear. For all the talk of how much we've transformed reference publishing, we're still fundamentally publishing books filled with old-school content in the same models. We need to get ready to truly redefine what it means to "publish" and what we consider to be "reference."

JANKE: The biggest opportunity for us is to be able to keep pace with market demand for electronic reference. This is critical since more and more libraries are switching over to *e* (electronic) from *p* (print). Pricing models, consortia models, platform standardization, keeping content updated, and keeping the technology current are just a few of the challenges that keep us up at night.

ROSS: Our main challenge is to find a pricing model that allows us to continue to provide the quality and updating that we know is necessary. Even with the large penetration that we have in the

market, there is a lot of pressure on schools and libraries to keep subscription services to a minimum and to control costs. We provide a lot of additional services to demonstrate value, and yet the pricing models are not in balance with what we deliver.

SP: *What can libraries do to help move electronic reference publishing (move it along, move to the next level, etc.)?*

BARNES: Don't cede their role as provider of quality reference material to the likes of Wikipedia or the myriad other free Web sites. Libraries can play the prominent role in reference again by moving their collections to electronic form and embracing new interfaces that better engage the end user.

GRATHWOHL: I think libraries can encourage more experimentation on the part of publishers. I also think we all need to promote the idea that having multiple authority models on the Web is not just acceptable; it's necessary. The Web has become as complex an environment as culture itself—Wikipedia, Citizendium, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and Oxford Scholarship Online are part of an interdependent information/knowledge spectrum; they don't compete with each other.

JANKE: Work closely with the library wholesalers on the process of an e-transaction between library-wholesaler-publisher.

ROSS: Libraries need to make their patrons more aware of their offerings so that usage of databases increases. This will help increase the input that publishers get so that they can be more responsive to their users' needs.

SP: *What value-added features will enhance reference "books" of the future?*

BARNES: First, they must be accessible within today's user's workflow. Second, they must be engaging—meaning highly visual, interlinked, personalizable—providing an experience that is more than just research.

GRATHWOHL: Good reference books (and electronic resources) have always served two purposes: gathering information and codifying knowledge. And it's a balancing act, because the two parts generally add up to a fixed quantity. With information overload as a defining element of Web 2.0 culture and beyond, there seems to be far greater need for validating information than for creating it. As a result I predict that scholars and experts validating information will be a far more prominent "feature" of new electronic reference products.

JANKE: Primary source documents, video, social networking on the reference platform.

ROSS: Reference sources have to be created for the digital environment and must include continual updates, links to related content (both within the product and to other products), and media, and also provide a way for users to interact with the content.

SP: *Any personal insights you'd like to share about the future of electronic reference publishing?*

BARNES: I think it is a tenuous time for libraries and reference publishers, but if we work together, we can restore the library as the recognized primary destination for trustworthy, high-quality reference materials. Together, we can make the library an integral component of the Web.

JANKE: The future is bright for reference publishers as long as they ride on top of the wave, not behind it or before it.

Sue Polanka is head of Reference Instruction, Paul Laurence Dunbar Library, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio.

Editor's Note

- Check out Sue Polanka's blog, *No Shelf Required* [<http://www.libraries.wright.edu/noshelfrequired/>], which provides a forum for librarians, publishers, aggregators, and others to discuss e-books and libraries.